



LOST IN THE MIDDLE

A GRAPHIC NOVEL ABOUT ABOUT LOSS AND
WHAT WE FIND ALONG THE WAY

DISCUSSION IDEAS AND PROMPTS FOR FAMILIES

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We are so excited to share this new graphic novel with you.

Lost in the Middle is a story about finding your way—in new situations and strange settings, and through everyday challenges.

But there is much more. The Fourth Avenue Middle School students also learn how to reach out to each other, listen, offer help, and even ask for help. The young personalities and friendships on the pages of this colorful and entertaining novel will endear themselves to you.

You'll cheer them on as they face everyday and special trials.

More importantly, you and your middle schooler will appreciate how young people support each other through it all.

Reading and then talking about stories can make it easier for young readers to discuss their own experiences and even share thoughts and emotions. They can learn valuable problem-solving skills from the characters' struggles and successes, and they can see that they are not alone. All family members can benefit from the experiences of the young people in this graphic novel. We hope you'll be inspired to learn how this book can serve as a bridge for important, meaningful conversations with your family, especially your middle schoolers.

[LOST IN THE MIDDLE]

WHY "LOST IN THE MIDDLE?"

Since early 2020, young people have faced extraordinary changes in their world—at home and school. The coronavirus pandemic upended families, schools, and communities—there was lost time and canceled special occasions at school, educational setbacks, isolation and separation from friends and activities, and even illness or death of community or family members due to COVID-19. As a parent or caregiver, you struggle to find the right answers and support your children.

Although books can help, very few of them have focused on children's collective losses, which can occur in tandem with a personal loss. This graphic novel offers a unique and rich opportunity for young readers to explore, in words and images, how students, schools, and communities are affected by these life-changing events.

Several questions guided the development of **Lost in the Middle**.

- ♥ How do young people experience loss and grief—individually and collectively?
- ♥ How can young people actively participate in and contribute to making positive changes in their lives during times of stress, trauma, or loss?
- ♥ What examples and future possibilities exist for families, schools, and communities to engage young people as valued social helpers, knowledge-bearers, and active contributors, rather than mere receivers of social-emotional content or learning programs provided to them by adults?

Lost in the Middle is an honest depiction of long-ago and recent losses including a parent, sibling, and school sports star; a grandmother's illness; moving and starting a new school; a beloved teacher's departure; and the usual day-to-day school dramas—all against the backdrop of a post-pandemic world. Their communal grief and collective support creates an environment that is not all sadness and tears at Fourth Avenue Middle School. There is joy in their relationships, fun, and creativity as they start a new project that promises to help new classmates. They stumble, get up, succeed, and learn the value of friendships and understanding each other. As you read **Lost in the Middle**, we encourage you to have open conversations with your family. We hope you and your children enjoy the ride!



[LOST IN THE MIDDLE]

LET'S BEGIN



First, take time to read the book by yourself, then think about the characters and themes. What do they mean to you, your young person, and your family? There may be parts of the stories that have great significance for you and are worthy of self-reflection.



Decide how you will approach bringing the book into your family's life—will you read it together or separately and then talk about it later?



Be open and allow young people to find their voices and tell you what they think.



Remember that there isn't a right or wrong way to interpret the story. Young people may be uncomfortable expressing their own emotions and thoughts. It may be easier to have a conversation about the characters' emotions and predicaments.

NEW

You never know who needs to hear your story.

Lost in the Middle is filled with stories. Kai, Elle, Cam, Alex, Mila, and Jaxon all have a story to tell. Sometimes they are hesitant to talk to each other, but with the support of caring adults and teachers, they recognize how their stories bring them closer together. We talked to young people about the book. They saw the value of sharing stories as a tool for helping others—they learn from each other and see that they are not alone.

"In different situations, people can open up and tell their story. Some people are more closed, and might not want to share. I want them to know they are not alone."

- 8th grader

[LOST IN THE MIDDLE]

THEMES IN THE BOOK

Each chapter introduces readers to new characters, the challenges they face, and how they support each other and work out successful outcomes.

Here are themes you and your middle schooler may recognize in **Lost in the Middle**.

- ⚡ The impact of loss and stressful events on the lives of young people is both unique and universal. These common responses can include physical, behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social reactions.
- ⚡ Collective grieving and resilience. When an entire community or school experiences the death of someone, many people will grieve for this person. These moments are opportunities to help young people understand loss, grief, empathy, and compassion. Young people grieve, even for those they've never met, and for their heroes, real or fictional.
- ⚡ Helping others while helping ourselves can lead to positive, growth-promoting change.
- ⚡ Friendships and relationships are the cornerstones of support. Listening to others, accepting, and recognizing how trying times affect our relationships is a lifelong lesson.
- ⚡ Making meaning is a pillar of psychological well-being. How we grow and learn from even the most challenging times helps build resilience.



[LOST IN THE MIDDLE]

4REEL

A SNEAK PEEK FROM THE FOURTH AVENUE MIDDLE SCHOOLERS

Below are a few quotes from *Lost in the Middle*, and a question or two you can use to start a conversation with your family.

EMPATHY, COMPASSION, AND BEING PRESENT

Early in the book, we learn that Alex has given up basketball since her brother's death. Elle notices her behavior change and says:

"I overheard you in the gym with Mila, and I... think I might know why you don't want to play basketball."

Alex angrily responds, "No one knows how I feel."

Elle doesn't give up, "Did you see my last @4Reel* post?"

Now Alex is curious, "What? No, why would I?"

Elle explains, "Okay... well, I lost my older sister Simone when I was 7 years old. We did everything together. I was like her little shadow."

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- Elle makes two assumptions and Alex, rightly so, angrily responds. This is an important message for empathy, not telling someone you "know" how they feel, we can never walk in another person's shoes, even if there are similar situations.

- Alex feels safe with Elle after the death of her brother, they share something very personal and very painful. They understand each other. Can all our friends be there for us all the time? Maybe each friend can offer us something different.

- Elle can understand Alex's grief and pain, but that doesn't mean that others (Mila) can't be quiet listeners. That will be the message for readers, no matter our experience, there can be a connection. We don't have to "fix" things, we just need to be present.

* @4Reel is the fictional social media platform used by the students at Fourth Avenue Middle School.

[LOST IN THE MIDDLE]

4 REEL

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SECRETS AND SHAME



Enter Jaxon. Kai and Elle didn't know Jaxon. Not well. Nobody at Fourth Ave did, really. All they knew is that he was usually in trouble.

He was distant. Kept people at arm's length. And definitely had a temper. He didn't like class. Teachers... not even friends.

But Jaxon had his reasons for being, well... Jaxon.

His dad wasn't around anymore. So, there was plenty he didn't love about being at 500 Walnut Street either. But nobody at school knew anything about his life outside of FAMS. And he wanted to keep it that way.

Kai senses something is going on with Jaxon and tries to reach out, many times. Kai realizes that Jaxon is the person behind the sad posts by @YouDKme.

Kai says, "Wait. Jaxon... you're @YouDKme? It's your Nana who's sick?"

Jaxon asks Kai about the video he made about his dad, "That video you did... uhmm... was... it didn't suck. Was it... hard?"

Kai admits to Jaxon, "I dunno man. Everyone's opening up these days. It actually kinda feels good."

Jaxon counters Kai, "Yeah, it's easy for you. Everyone LIKES you!"

And for the first time ever, Jaxon shared his story. About his dad... his nana... all of it.

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- Eye-opening exchanges between kids illustrate how they reach out to each other, and persevere. They talk about "getting things off their chests" and being there, no matter what.

- Think about Jaxon (or a bullying character in a movie or TV show) who is hiding insecurities and doubts underneath their exterior. What message would you like that person to hear?

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GRATITUDE AND SELF-AWARENESS

In one of the final chapters of *Lost in the Middle*, Kai recognizes what his last year in middle school has meant to him.

"I know this year has had its ups and downs. Sure, we've had some fights. We've also been there for each other. We've opened up. But there's still one person who hasn't really opened up yet... me."

So, Kai opened up, "A lot of you might not know, but I lost my dad years ago. I still think about him every day. But you all helped me realize... we don't have to face hard stuff like that alone."

"Because even when we feel lost in the middle—we're not lost forever. We can always still find each other."

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- Kai makes an important point, that even though there were tense conversations on @4Reel there was plenty of good- students opening up, students helping each other, and sharing their problems and worries.
- His honest words set the stage for others, and his peers share this moment with him. What would you say to Kai at that moment? And after he shared his story?





LOST IN THE MIDDLE

There is much more to **Lost in the Middle**; it is funny and maybe a bit cringe-worthy—there's a @4Reel disaster and online brawl, a falling out among friends, a pep rally that goes very wrong, a principal's last-ditch attempt to make peace, and the creation of a new way to bring students together—the Lost and Found club.

There are moments of tension and drama, but the students work through it, often the face-to-face conversations clear the air (adults can confirm this). All the emojis in the world will not convert a misunderstanding into an understanding. The pandemic prevented important moments of human connection—talking to someone face to face, making eye contact, patting them on the back, seeing them smile, and hearing them laugh. In a way, @4Reel (the fictional social media platform used by the students at Fourth Avenue Middle School) perpetuated the loss they all felt during the pandemic. Perhaps, the Lost and Found club will allow them to be present for each other and sustain their friendships.

And perhaps, Mr. Benny said it best.

"The Lost & Found Club is a great way for you to keep being there for each other. In person. And that's why I want to give you this space... from this day on, my old classroom is officially yours..."

Thanks, Mr. Benny.

[LOST IN THE MIDDLE]

4 REEL

Jx

FIND YOUR VOICE...

A large white rectangular area for writing, set against a blue background with a diamond pattern and locker-like elements.